

# DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 256 733

SP 025 994

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**TITLE** Training Peer Teachers to Improve Comprehension Instruction.  
**PUB DATE** Apr 85  
**NOTE** 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (69th, March 31-April 4, 1984, Chicago, IL).  
**PUB TYPE** Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)  
**EDRS PRICE** MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
**DESCRIPTORS** Change Strategies; Elementary Education; \*Elementary School Teachers; \*Helping Relationship; Inservice Teacher Education; \*Peer Teaching; Reading Comprehension; \*Reading Instruction; Teacher Behavior; Teaching Methods.

## ABSTRACT

Following a year-long study, model procedures were developed for eight pairs of peer coaches and inservice elementary school teachers to modify reading instruction practices to improve reading comprehension. Specific teaching behaviors were chosen to determine whether coaches could encourage teacher clients to: (1) incorporate more direct teaching of comprehension during formal reading instruction; (2) maintain a more equitable balance between instructional time devoted to word recognition instruction and time devoted to comprehension instruction; (3) promote independent level reading during formal reading instruction; and (4) minimize the amount of instructional time used for non-instructional or transitional activities. A report is given of the implementation and results of the peer coaching model with four pairs of teachers, i.e., 4 coaches and 4 clients. A description is given of the methods used in training the teacher coaches, and the observations made during ensuing coaching sessions. An analysis of findings from the observations and student results indicates that it is possible to change teacher behavior by using peer coaches. (JD)

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TRAINING PEER TEACHERS TO IMPROVE COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American  
Educational Research Association, Chicago, April, 1985.

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### OBJECTIVES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this investigation was to improve the quality and quantity of comprehension instruction in elementary schools by using teachers trained in comprehension instruction as peer coaches for other elementary teachers. In a two year-investigation of comprehension instruction in elementary schools, (Kurth and Stromberg, 1983; 1984) found that it was possible to significantly change teacher behavior during reading instruction. Using a model of intervention developed by Boyan and Copeland (1968) an intervention team of professors and research assistants had changed specific teacher behaviors when teaching comprehension. However, the implementation of this strategy involved many supervisory personnel and much time and effort on the part of both teachers and the research team. It was felt that after trained teachers were proficient in specific strategies for comprehension instruction, this cadre of trained teachers could be used as peer coaches for other teachers and could help their colleagues develop specific comprehension instruction strategies.

Previous research by Showers, (1984); Arends (1984); and Grimmett (1984) had shown that peer coaches could form helping relationships, provide encouragement for beginning teachers, and also effect certain attitude changes in the peers they were coaching. The present study was designed to determine whether trained teacher coaches could also help teachers change specific instructional behaviors in the classroom. It was felt that the collegial relationship found between peer teachers would help in providing such changes in teaching behaviors. The benefits of colleagueship have been well established in the literature on changing teacher behavior (Alfonso & Goldsberry, 1982; Cogan, 1972).

Thus, the general purpose of this year-long study was to develop model procedures for peer coaches working with inservice elementary teachers to modify instructional practices during reading instruction. A model of intervention developed by Boyan and Copeland (1968) was adapted for use in this study. After reviewing data from previous studies which had examined teaching practices during formal reading instruction (Durkin, 1978; and Kurth and Greenlaw, 1981), the specific teaching behaviors chosen for this study were to determine whether coaches could encourage teacher clients: 1. to incorporate more direct teaching of comprehension during formal reading instruction; 2. to maintain a more equitable balance between the instructional time devoted to word recognition instruction and time devoted to comprehension instruction; 3. to promote

independent level reading during formal reading instruction; and 4. to minimize the amount of instructional time used for non-instructional or transitional activities.

## PROCEDURE

### SUBJECTS

The volunteers for the study were two groups of teachers. The coach teachers were eight volunteers from the second and third grade teachers who had already participated in the previous classroom comprehension study (Kurth & Stromberg, 1984) and who had learned specific strategies for comprehension instruction. The client teachers (those who would be coached) were eight volunteers who taught second and third grade in two elementary schools in the same district who had heard about the program and had asked to participate in the training in comprehension instruction.

For logistical reasons, it was decided that the coaches should work with teachers from their respective schools. The volunteer clients were given the list of four coaches from their respective schools and asked to choose the coach they would like to work with in their school. The pairing of the clients and coaches was done by the researcher on the basis of the clients' choices. In each instance the client got either her first or second choice as her coach. The coaches were asked if they would be willing to work with the person

assigned, and in each instance the coach agreed. Because the only criteria for being a coach was participation in the previous comprehension training program, age and years of experience were not considered in the choices. In all but two instances the coaches were older and more experienced teachers than their clients. However, in the two dyads where the client teacher was more experienced than the coach, it did not seem to pose a problem for the participants. This was probably due to the fact that the coach teachers had credibility because it was assumed that they had a background of knowledge gained from their participation in the comprehension study even though they had fewer years of teaching experience than their clients.

#### COACH TRAINING

After the initial selection of coach-client pairs, the coaches attended four two-hour training sessions led by the researcher who had conducted the earlier comprehension study. The first purpose of these training sessions was to introduce the eight coaches to a modified version of the Boyan and Copeland (1968) supervision model which gives guidelines for bringing about teacher change. The second purpose was to acquaint the coaches with the specific comprehension goals which had been chosen for the study. The Boyan and Copeland model assumes that many of the problems teachers encounter in the classroom

can be resolved if the teacher can change his or her behavior in positive ways and that teachers are often unaware of many teaching and learning behaviors that occur in their classrooms. Boyan and Copeland propose that increased awareness of teaching and learning behaviors in the classroom can help teachers recognize needed changes. The model further assumes that teaching and learning behaviors can be revealed to the teacher through systematic observation. Thus coaches were encouraged to help teachers recognize their behaviors during formal reading instruction by doing careful classroom observations of teacher behaviors. Coaches were taught two relatively simple but efficient systems for classroom observation. One system monitored certain teacher behaviors, and the other system monitored certain student behaviors. Garman (1982) notes that any supervision or staff development program can be helped by classroom observation when the observation is specific and revolves around behavior that is of interest to the teacher. Coaches were encouraged to structure all classroom observations around the project objectives and to answer questions posed by teachers about their own behaviors with specific feedback from observations.

A final premise of the Boyan and Copeland model is that teachers will be less threatened and therefore more willing to take advice from a person in a collegial rather than a supervisory capacity. Coaches were encouraged to stress their role as helper and colleague, and practiced role playing measures to help give feedback about teaching behaviors in a non-threatening

and friendly atmosphere. It was hoped that coaches could present observation results to their clients in a way that teachers would find valid and could use them to identify areas of needed change. Coaches were also encouraged to give demonstration lessons and provide lesson plan samples to help teachers develop comprehension instruction strategies. It was felt that if the coaches would teach demonstration lessons and were willing to be observed by their client, a real collegial relationship could develop. The benefits of collegueship have been well established in the literature on supervision (Alfonso & Goldsberry, 1982; Cogan, 1972) and coaches were encouraged to stress their friendly helping role.

The purpose of the second part of the training sessions was to review for the coaches the target instructional behaviors which had been chosen as goals for the study. One of the findings of an earlier study of instructional behavior (Kurth and Greenlaw, 1981) was that a distinct difference could be seen in the approach used by teachers when teaching comprehension skills as compared to the approach used by teachers when teaching word recognition skills. In most instances, when a teacher was focusing on a word recognition skill, a period of direct instruction was used during which time the teacher discussed strategies for using the skill being taught. Then an assignment was given, and the children proceeded to apply the skill just taught. However, during comprehension instruction, teachers rarely used direct instruction. Instead,

they simply gave a comprehension assignment and then assisted individual children if they had difficulty answering certain comprehension questions. Thus, most of the instruction in comprehension was done on a teacher to individual pupil basis in contrast to word recognition instruction which was done on a group basis. This finding that teachers use very little direct instruction in comprehension teaching is substantially the same finding as Durkin reported and classified as "mentioning". When faced with teaching comprehension tasks, teachers simply "mentioned" the task with a cursory overview and then asked children to do the task. Therefore, one of the goals set for the study was that coaches would encourage more direct teaching of comprehension strategies by clients. In order to encourage this type of teaching, coaches were trained in writing lesson plans based on specific comprehension skills which they could present as demonstration lessons in their client's classroom. The criteria for these lessons included the following; 1. a measurable comprehension objective; 2. a period of at least four minutes of direct instruction in comprehension strategies; and 3. the application and assessment of the skill being taught.

While working with the teachers on lesson planning, researchers in the previous comprehension study found that teachers had difficulty formulating specific objectives for comprehension lessons. The teachers often stated their objectives in vague generalities such as "read to understand the story" or "read

to answer the questions in "Rainbows". This was in direct contrast to their objectives for word recognition lessons which were very specific. The lack of specificity in comprehension objectives seemed to substantiate what Lanier and Floden (1978) reported when they claimed "teachers need help in having knowledge translated into articulate sets of curricula." Coaches were trained to help their clients develop clear objectives for the teaching of comprehension. Reviews of the major comprehension skills were given to the coaches and suggestions for development of clearly written objectives were also given. During the training sessions, the coaches developed a series of prototypic lesson plans which could be used when they were working with their clients.

Another objective for the study was for coaches to help clients achieve a more equitable balance between instructional time devoted to word recognition instruction and instructional time devoted to comprehension instruction. Previous research had shown that many teachers spend a much greater percentage of time devoted to word recognition instruction rather than comprehension instruction, and that comprehension skill teaching was generally done on a teacher to individual child basis whereas the word recognition instruction was generally done on a group basis. To try to lessen this disparity between the time spent on instruction in word recognition and instruction in comprehension, coaches were encouraged to stress the idea that comprehension instruction is central to an excellent

reading program and to observe the time spent on each activity for reporting to clients.

A third objective of the study was to increase the amount of independent level reading done by children in the reading classes. Data from the previous study (Kurth and Greenlaw, 1981) had shown that even though all teacher subjects had used three groups for teaching reading, little or no modification of instruction either in content or methodology was done for any of the ability groups. Because teachers often used exactly the same materials for students in each group, students were often attempting to read material that was either too difficult or too easy for them. A third goal of the study, therefore, was to determine if coaches could help clients learn to modify the formal reading instruction so that it would meet the needs of individual children. Coaches were taught how to ascertain independent reading levels for each student by using abbreviated informal reading inventories. Coaches also gathered a pool of examples of short, carefully graded, materials on many levels. These materials were taken from the basal readers, supplementary basal readers, and from trade books available in the school. These materials were gathered so that coaches would have a large collection of graded materials near at hand to help clients place children in materials that were suitable for them.

The final objective of the study, to encourage teachers to minimize the amount of instructional time used for

non-instructional or transitional activities, resulted from the previous finding (Kurth and Greenlaw, 1981) that approximately 20 per cent of the total formal reading instruction time was spent on transitional or non-instructional activities. In this observation category, unlike any of the other categories, there was a great deal of variance from teacher to teacher. Therefore, coaches were given training in classroom management skills and were asked to observe carefully to see if transitional or non-instructional activities eroded much of the formal reading instruction time. These four all-day training sessions were conducted one week prior to the beginning of the fall semester.

#### IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COACHING SESSIONS

Pre treatment and post treatment observations of specific comprehension teaching behaviors were made during the third week of September and the last week in April by an observation team of research assistants who had done the observations for the previous comprehension study. These observers measured

1. the amount of time spent in direct instruction in comprehension during formal reading instruction;
2. the amount of time devoted to word recognition instruction and time devoted to comprehension instruction;
3. the number of children reading on their independent level during formal reading instruction;
- and 4. the amount of time spent on non-instructional or

transitional activities during formal reading instruction.

The coach-client sessions were begun one week after the pre treatment observations had been completed. The coaches were not told the results of these pre-treatment observations. The initial coach-client sessions were used by the coaches to stress the idea that the role of the coach role was to assist teachers rather than evaluate or supervise them in any way.

A substitute teacher was provided for each coach-client dyad for two hours each week so that the coaches and clients could spend time visiting and observing other classrooms and to provide an opportunity for demonstration teaching. Coaches met with their clients a minimum of one hour per week. These regular coaching sessions were held either before or after school or during the planning periods. These coaching sessions were tape recorded for later analysis. During the sessions coaches discussed comprehension teaching strategies; results of the classroom observations done by the coach; lesson planning and classroom management. When they felt it was necessary, the coaches used demonstration teaching to help clients learn new instructional strategies. Detailed observation and specific feedback by the coaches helped clients identify their personal teaching behaviors in a non-threatening atmosphere. Large amounts of time were also spent in the planning sessions helping clients write comprehension lesson plans with specific aims.

### RESULTS AND EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

The post treatment observations of all client teachers showed that changes in each of the four target areas had occurred. The pre treatment observations of the client teachers showed that the average amount of formal reading instruction time devoted to direct teaching of comprehension skills was 9 per cent, and the post treatment observations showed that the average amount of formal reading instruction time devoted to direct teaching of comprehension skills was 26 per cent. Thus, it was possible for coaches to influence clients to do more direct comprehension instruction.

The second objective of the study was to help clients achieve a more equitable balance between instructional time devoted to word recognition instruction and instructional time devoted to comprehension instruction. The pre treatment observers found that the clients spent an average of 42 per cent of the formal reading instruction time teaching word recognition skills and 22 per cent of the formal reading time teaching comprehension skills. It is also important to note that the comprehension skill teaching was generally done on a teacher to individual child basis whereas the word recognition instruction was generally done on a group basis. This would tend to inflate the comprehension teaching time. The post treatment observation results showed that the clients spent an average of 21 per

cent of the formal reading instruction time teaching word recognition skills and 38 per cent of the formal reading instruction time teaching comprehension skills. Rather than suggesting that less time be devoted to teaching word recognition skills, the coaches continually stressed the idea that comprehension instruction is central to an excellent reading program. As the coaches continued to focus on comprehension and as clients gained more confidence in their ability to teach comprehension tasks, the clients began to devote more time to teaching comprehension skills. They also expressed feelings of satisfaction with their ability to teach comprehension. A possible reason for this change in teacher behavior was stated by Duffy (1982): "Time on task is affected by what teachers feel they can teach successfully and that teachers will spend more time on tasks that they feel comfortable and successful in teaching."

A third objective of the study was to increase the amount of independent reading done by children in the reading classes. The pre treatment observation results show that, on an average, only 35 per cent of the students were reading on their independent level each day. The post treatment observation results show that, on an average, 64 per cent of the students were reading on their independent level each day.

Because clients often used exactly the same materials for students in each ability group, students were often attempting to read material that was either too difficult or too easy for them. After coaches showed clients how to estimate children's

independent reading level and provided them with many examples of multi-grade materials, the clients were able to provide material which was at an independent level for a greater number of students.

The final objective of the study was to encourage clients to minimize the amount of instructional time used for non-instructional or transitional activities. In this observation category, unlike any of the other categories, there was a great deal of variance from teacher to teacher. The pre treatment observation results showed that an average of 16 per cent of the formal reading instruction time was spent in non-instructional or transitional activities. However this average was increased by one teacher who had a very high percentage of non-instructional time in formal reading. The coach for this particular client spent special time showing her client methods for increasing the efficiency of her classroom management techniques. The post treatment observation results for all the teachers show that an average of about 8 per cent of the formal reading instruction time was spent in non-instructional or transitional activities.

The pre and post treatment observation scores for all the objectives of the study are summarized in Table One.

INSERT TABLE ONE HERE

Analysis of the tapes of the coaching sessions showed that a close working relationship had developed between coaches

and clients. A post treatment survey taken by both coaches and clients indicated that both coaches and clients felt positively about the experience. The coaches had been asked to spend a minimum of one hour per week working with their clients. In most instances, many more hours were spent together. The results of this study show that it is possible to change teacher behavior by using peer coaches. Coaches seemed to be able to develop close working relationships more easily and in a shorter time than the supervisory personnel used in the previous study. Clients were more willing to be observed by peers than by supervisors. However, it is imperative that coaches have specific training in both comprehension instruction and in intervention techniques before they are asked to help other teachers. This training also must have specific and measurable goals if classroom behavior is going to change. These carefully structured goals helped to keep the coach-client behavior on task. It is also important that both coach and client have some scheduling flexibility so that training can be done within the classroom during reading instruction. When asked what was the most valuable part of the program, the demonstration teaching and the specific help with the lesson plans were listed by the client teachers as the most helpful part of the program. The clients also reported that just having someone to talk to about classroom problems and successes was a morale booster.

After listening to the tapes, it seems clear to this researcher that much of the effectiveness of the training came from the close collegial relationships which were established between the coaches and clients and from the specific teaching behaviors the coaches were able to identify. Probably one of the most helpful aspects for developing an open and trusting relationship was the large amount of time which the coaches spent in the classrooms and in sessions with their clients. It takes time for workable relationships to develop. One of the remarkable insights gained from listening to the tapes was the task oriented nature of the conferences. Very little time was spent in discussing items of a personal nature or general news about the school. As the project progressed, the sessions became even more task oriented even though the participants were becoming very good friends.

The attitudes of both teachers and coaches remained enthusiastic throughout the project, and this enthusiasm was reflected in the follow up questionnaire. When asked whether they would be willing to become coaches, the client teachers all indicated that they would be willing to do so.

The results of this study show that it is possible to change teacher behavior by using peer coaches, and that although the task requires concentration and diligence, both coaches and clients generally found the experience very positive.

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TABLE ONE

## COMPARISON OF PRE AND POST TREATMENT OBSERVATION SCORES

|                                                        | Pre Treatment<br>Percentage | Post Treatment<br>Percentage |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Obj. 1                                                 |                             |                              |
| Instr. time spent<br>teaching comprehension            | 9                           | 26                           |
| Obj. 2                                                 |                             |                              |
| Word Recognition Instr./<br>Comprehension Instr. Ratio | 4/22                        | 21/38                        |
| Obj. 3                                                 |                             |                              |
| % of Students reading<br>on Independent Level          | 35                          | 64                           |
| Obj. 4                                                 |                             |                              |
| Non-Instructional or<br>transitional activity          | 16                          | 8                            |